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ABSTRACT

In many countries today teaching has been identified as one of the most stressful occupations. The total annual cost of stress to the British Education Service has been estimated as high as 360 million U.S. dollars. The objective of this research study with teachers in the Department of Education at the University of Manchester was to identify stressors and stress management strategies for teachers in the North West of England. Data was collected from 100 teachers, multiple school site visits; and 40 focused teacher interviews. The research paradigm used, illuminative research, encourages interpretive human skills and concentrates on information gathering concerned with description and interpretation rather than measurement and prediction. Findings indicated certain work related factors were common stressors, even though causes of stress might be different. Categories of stressors included: teacher/pupil relationships; relationships with colleagues; relationships with parents and the wider community; innovation and change; school management and administrations; and time factors. Factors which contribute to stress in schools at both personal and organizational levels suggest individuals differ in how they respond to and manage stress. There appears to be a major stigma attached to the idea that individual British teachers suffer from stress. (JBJ)

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TOWARDS THE IDENTIFICATION AND MANAGEMENT OF STRESS IN BRITISH TEACHERS

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TOWARDS THE IDENTIFICATION AND MANAGEMENT OF STRESS IN BRITISH TEACHERS.

Introduction.

In many countries today teaching has been identified as one of the most stressful occupations (Hunter 1977). In the US., inner-city high school teaching is now ranked as the number one stressful job, ahead of occupations such as air traffic controller, medical intern and firefighter (Men's Health, 1991). It is said that many teachers are being treated for symptoms similar to those which combat soldiers are likely to encounter (Bloch, 1978). There is increasing concern and awareness among the teaching profession in the United Kingdom that its members are currently experiencing considerable stress. One of the major teaching unions, The Association of Assistant Masters and Mistresses, (AMMA 1990) in *Managing Stress. Guidelines For Teachers*, point out that:

> "Few would now dispute that teaching is a stressful profession, and it is widely acknowledged that the National Curriculum, LMS and other Education Reform Act developments are exacerbating an already tense situation." (p2)

[The above quotation refers to the many changes introduced into schools as a result of the 1988 Education Reform Act]. Stuart Nattrass, the Chair of the Health and Safety Executive's Education Service Committee in the United Kingdom, at the launch of a recent report, *Managing Occupational Stress: A Guide for Managers and Teachers in the Schools*, defined stress "as the number one health problem amongst teachers". A survey of British teachers in January 1991 revealed an increase of about 300 percent in the number of teachers leaving the profession through ill health since 1981. (*Teacher's Weekly* 31st. January 1991 p9.)

A headteacher of an infant school in a recent communication to the researchers identified a wide range of pressures, and had this to say:

> "My post as head teacher of an infant school has changed dramatically since the passing of the 1988 Education Act. Political legislation has transformed the nature and scale of my work, minimising my training experience whilst thrusting me rapidly forward into budgetting, computing, site management, risk management etc - untrained and inexperienced."

The importance of these comments can be contextualised more readily when one reads that in the 1990s the number of teachers leaving the profession through ill health nearly trebled (Dunham, 1992). Retirements and drop-outs through ill health in the UK were 1,617 in 1979 and 4,123 in 1990, with steady yearly increases in the early 1980s and a big increase since 1988. The total annual cost of stress to the Education Service has been estimated to be as high as £230 million or 360 million US $. This compares to a similar pattern of drop-out in the US where, in 1986, it was predicted that more than one million teachers would leave the profession in less than a decade, with the majority of these being dedicated to teaching (McLaughlin, et al., 1986). Teacher unions in the United Kingdom have become increasingly active in the identification and management of teacher stress. A number of studies have been commissioned over the past decade by the major teaching unions (NUT Survey 1990, AMMA 1987 and 1990.) These have highlighted the most common sources of stress in classrooms and schools. Stressors cited in the union surveys were mirrored in our research with teachers. Other stress surveys conducted by Kelly at Manchester Metropolitan University (1988) and by Cox at the University of Nottingham (1989) reinforced

previous union stress survey results. Research found that much of the stress reported by teachers could be attributed in general to the rapid rate of change in the eduction service in the 1980's and 1990's.

Our objectives in this research study with teachers in the Department of Education at the University of Manchester were aimed at identifying stressors and stress management strategies for teachers in the North West of England.

Research Approach.

Conventional approaches to the research of teacher stress have followed the experimental and psychometric traditions. Their aim of achieving "objective methods" has resulted frequently in studies which are somewhat artificial and restricted. Teacher stress, its causes and effects, is a complex research area which is not easily susceptible, in our opinion, to more traditional research approaches. Therefore an alternative paradigm was considered to be more appropriate - that of illuminative research (Parlett and Hamilton 1985).

This methodological approach encourages interpretive human skills and concentrates on information gathering. The task is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex reality or realities surrounding the phenomenon under investigation; in this case teacher stress: in short, to "illuminate". The primary concern of illuminative methodology is with description and

interpretation rather than with measurement and prediction.

As an appropriate paradigm, we considered that the principles of illuminative research could be modified and adapted to suit our purpose, an approach which we had adopted in a previous study (Brown, M and Ralph, S 1992). We began by conducting a series of detailed discussions with teachers. A number of lines of investigation then emerged, which led us to the central research issues - those individual and whole school factors underlying teacher stress and how they might be managed.

Methods, Techniques and Data Sources.

The study was conducted during the 1992/93 academic year. We began with an extensive data base of 100 teachers, derived from a series of participatory workshops with teachers in the Department of Education at the University of Manchester and on school in-service training days, which gave teachers the opportunity of articulating their thoughts in discussion with colleagues in a non threatening and supportive environment.
We then followed this up by visiting different schools in four local school board areas in the North West of England, chosen because they contained a good balance of city, urban and rural schools. We also visited independent schools. These schools were typical of other schools in the North West of England, given their limited resources, traditional organisational structures and management hierarchies, demoralised staffs, ageing buildings and the demands of extensive and rapid change, in a political

climate generally considered inimical to the well established education tradition.

Focused interviews took place with 40 teachers in individual, forty five minute sessions between September and December, 1992, and were professionally transcribed; follow up sessions were arranged as needed to clarify or extend teacher comments. Reviews of school and faculty documents provided additional information on how school staffs were dealing with the issue of teacher stress.

The aim of our research was to investigate the actual sources of stress in schools and from that information to identify strategies to improve organisational health. We interviewed teachers and also examined school development plans for examples of staff stress management policies. In addition, we collected the views of a number of local school boards.

Within this first stage of the research an information profile of the teacher/school was assembled, using data collected from a number of areas, e.g. observation, interviews, questionnaires, in-service training courses on stress management and visits to participating schools. In the early stages our investigation yielded a number of common incidents, recurring trends and issues which were raised in discussion; for example, internal versus external demands on teachers, excessive workloads, pupil attitudes and behaviour, working environment and conditions, lack of resources, poor communication models, rate and speed of change

and poor management and organisation in schools. These we either observed for ourselves or heard about from teachers. Subsequent stages of the research continued with the selection of a number of such phenomena, occurrences or groups of opinions, as topics for more sustained and intensive enquiry. Our questioning became more focused and directed on those factors which emerged as common. We then looked for patterns of cause and effect underlying personal and organisational stress and attempted to place them within a broader explanatory context. We were particularly interested in weighing alternative interpretations and explanations in the light of information obtained, eg. why teachers differed in their ability to manage stressful situations.

Research findings.

Our findings indicated that certain work related factors emerged as common, even though the causes of stress might be different for each individual teacher or group of teachers. These included:

1. Teacher/pupil relationships:

(a) Class size and ability mix.

(b) Lack of discipline as perceived by teachers.

(c) Changes in pupil motivation and attitude.

(d) Anxiety over test and examination results.

2. Relationships with colleagues:

(a) Uneven distribution of work loads.

(b) Personality clashes/differences.

(c) Poor systems of communication at every level.

(d) Lack of community spirit.

(e) Little or no social or academic interaction between different staff groupings.

3. Relationships with parents and the wider community:

(a) Parental pressure to achieve good results.

(b) The threat of performance management systems.

(c) Poor status and pay.

(d) Biased media coverage.

(e) Being obliged to accommodate unrealistic expectations.

(f) General societal cynicism about the role of teachers.

4. Innovation and Change:

(a) Apparent lack of rationale behind constant demands for change.

(b) Feelings of powerlessness and of failure.

(c) Lack of resources and information to facilitate change.

5. School Management and Administration:

(a) Little real involvement in the decision-making process.

(b) Poor overall school organisation.

(c) Poor models of communication

(d) Lack of appropriate training to meet new job demands.

(e) Poor technical and administrative support.

(f) Poor staff facilities, for example, lack of personal work spaces and storage areas.

6. Time factors:

(a) Increasing variety and number of tasks.

(b) Additional work demands outside the normal school hours, which could lead to conflict with family and friends.

(c) Frequency and ineffective organisation of meetings.

Our study confirms the importance of considering both organisational and personal factors in any examination of teacher stress. It reveals also that it is the relationship among the above factors which explains why many teachers find it difficult to address what they increasingly perceive to be the stigma of stress. Similar to the work of Maslow (1954) on a hierarchy of needs, most teachers say that organisational needs must be met before personal ones. They prefer to operate at the surface level, tinkering with and modifying traditional practices until school organisations give them the appropriate recognition and support. Teachers say they become more able to manage stress, however, even in the face of organisational constraints, if they have a substantial voice in deciding and initiating stresss management strategies. School senior management too share this concern.

Peggy, a primary school headteacher in a semi urban area, reported the following:

> "My attempts to alleviate stress are as follows ..... firstly, I blocked up one of three doors into my very small office...to reduce the three pronged attack! Secondly, I attended a stress management course at Manchester University which helped me to plan my time more effectively and to regain control of my working life. I counsel myself to value myself and my life. Fortunately, we have a life-saving support group of headteachers within our area. We meet for two hours once a month - and laugh (the best therapy of all). We have decided on two residential courses a year, each based on a project to benefit all our schools eg. all schools share a "Good Behaviour Book" so that the same rules apply in all our schools, and we are working on a cross-phase policy at present. The greatest support is to know that you are not alone and can turn to a colleague who will understand your anxieties."

Change issues emerged as a very significant factor in determining

and contributing to stress levels in schools. Teachers, for instance, say that a lack of time, professional development opportunities and funding can limit their interest in even thinking about change. Demands for change under these circumstances can result in excessive stress for teachers. Mary, a teacher of some ten years experience in a rural school, had this to say:

> "The current political situation and the insistance on getting back to traditional [Victorian!] values in teaching have greatly contributed to levels of stress among my colleagues in school. Some of the changes which have been introduced since 1988 have looked positive at a superficial level and yet the overall result has been the deskilling of many of my teacher colleagues and has lead to feelings of powerlessness and alienation in my school."

Contraction in school budgets in Britain has meant reduced opportunities for personal and professional growth for teachers. Appointment to a senior post in a school would usually be associated with expectations of change and growth, not with cut backs and downsizing. The following report from Eric, a senior teacher in an urban secondary school, echoes the comments of many other teachers in our survey:

> "When I became a senior teacher I expected to be given the opportunity to be proactive and to introduce new ideas to the school. I expected to have some time for creative thinking, to engage in philosophical discussion with colleages and to read educational journals and literature. Budget cuts, at both National and local levels interfered with my plans. I was unable to develop myself or my colleagues and I found this very frustrating. I lost all enjoyment in my job and am now looking forward to taking early retirement."

Since the introduction of the Education Reform Act in 1988, teachers' workloads have increased enormously. Some of our sample teachers, in order to survive, had to learn time

management and assertiveness skills. Pat, a male teacher in an urban school, was a typical survivor:

> "As a teacher I find the major source of stress to be workload. Not only is the volume of what one is expected to do increasing continuously, but also what one is expected to do and when. Many additional demands come in the form of administrative tasks to be completed at short notice as a matter of relative urgency. While such work is perceived as important by managers, it is not by me, as it is not teaching.
>
> Coping with stress requires refusal, prioritisation and subversive socialising. When I can say "no" to extra work I do so - if it is not part of my job description, I will not do it. The work I must do, I attempt to prioritise, tackling important and urgent work first. Finally, I indulge in a good gripe [=grumble] with close colleagues as often as possible. This typically takes the form of contrasting the work required of us by managers in a limited time, with that required of them in more, and better-paid, time. Pointing up the hypocrisy and incompetence of those "in charge" is very therapeutic."

David, a teacher of some four years' experience in an Inner City Secondary School, achieved an excellent first degree and is currently in his first job. Like many others in our sample, he is finding it difficult to cope, and even more difficult to express these feelings and fears with his colleagues. He says:

> "I hate getting up in the morning. The thought of having to face the fourth year [=15 year old pupils] yet again fills one with despair. I cannot control them. They do not want to learn. I am terrified that my colleagues will hear the noise and call me a failure. I can't sleep at night and count the days to the end of term. I think it would help to talk to somebody about my stress, but I think then I would be labelled as incompetent. There is so much stigma attached to admitting that you are stressed. It's an admission that you can't cope. If I said this and lost my job, where would I get another one?"

Discussion and Conclusions.

Having listened to teachers describe those factors which

contribute to stress in schools at both personal and organisational levels, we found ourselves concurring with other research findings which suggest that individuals differ in how they respond to and manage stress (Dunham, J 1992). Conflicting views about the nature and intensity of stress factors were common. Teachers repeated the words " stressed", "tired", "exhausted", "frustrated" and "alienated", over and over again when talking about teaching and stress. What we found most strongly expressed in the many self-reports and interviews was that, in Britain at least, there appears to be a major stigma attached to the idea that individual teachers suffer from stress and often our respondents were afraid to discuss this for fear that it might indicate to colleagues and superiors that they were not up to the job; for example, we noted teacher concern to conceal from others attendance at stress management courses. Our research, thus far, suggests that there is still a reluctance on the part of some teachers even to admit to themselves that they are experiencing stress. This appears to be a peculiarly British phenomenon and may be linked to what is perceived as reticent British attitudes. One of the central issues to emerge is that individuals need to recognise and analyze openly for themselves, signs and causes of stress at work, thus removing the real or imaginary stigma attached to it. They then need to decide upon appropriate strategies for its management. These themes lead to a focus on the importance of teacher voice as a bridge between organisational and personal stress reduction policies. These voices need to be heard at the whole school level and senior management teams need to adopt a considered approach to the

management of staff stress. Only an organisational approach can provide the appropriate help for all teachers (NUT 1990). This approach will have implications for those who lead schools, as they, too, need to recognise that the acknowledgement of stress in teachers is not a sign of laziness, weakness or incompetence. Ordinary teachers need to be reassured that they will not lose professional esteem or promotional opportunities by admitting to stress.

Those responsible for managing the Education Service at local level may have an added role to play in the co-ordination of programmes to help teachers identify and manage their stress. Our research suggests that most of the work which has been done thus far has concentrated on dealing with the symptoms rather than removing the causes of stress. We would welcome more emphasis placed upon the encouragement of teachers to formulate action plans, supported by the necessary follow up by school or local school board, in the pursuance of stress reduction policies. Managing stress is, in our opinion, a whole school issue, and may well require a modification of culture and attitudes in many schools and local school board areas.

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